

Witnesses to Love

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, May 17, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Matthew 24:32-42](#) and [Acts 1:6-14](#)

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Imagine it's a few generations after the execution of Jesus and you're writing the story of Jesus and the early church. You've written about Jesus. Maybe you included a birth story. You probably wrote about his baptism, a ritual his followers continue practicing. You wrote about his teaching and his healing and his challenging the systems of oppression and evil. You wrote about his execution at the hands of the occupying empire.

And you wrote about his resurrection – something you didn't experience and something that is hard to explain. You took stories that have been told about the resurrection and crafted them to fit your narrative. You might have even made up one – some things are easier to explain in a story than in a didactic lesson.

You notice that the community's stories about the resurrection all take place within the first weeks after the crucifixion. How do you explain why the appearances of the resurrected Jesus stop? And how do you get him off stage so you can turn to the story of the birth of the church? Luke did this by telling the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Luke had literary precedence for this story.

I'm not sure which Prophet from the Hebrew scriptures is considered the most important in Judaism. I'm convinced, however, that the top two contenders are Moses and Elijah. Moses probably comes out on top. He is important because he is the leader who led the Hebrew people out of slavery, gave them the law, and helped them form into a community.

Elijah is no slouch, though. He was a great defender of fidelity to God. And he didn't die, according to 2 Kings 2. Rather than dying, he rides off into the heavens on a chariot of fire, passing on the mantle of his ministry to his protégé, Elisha. Elijah's non-death led Jews to expect him to return to make the way for the Messiah. And the Messiah, they believed, would come to throw off the yoke of oppression of foreign exile or occupation, and restore the kingdom of David.

Some of you are ahead of me. You already see the parallel between Luke's story of Jesus ascending into heaven and the story of Elijah ascending into heaven.¹ Luke doesn't have any chariots or horses of fire. Instead, Luke has Jesus enveloped in a cloud (an ancient symbol of divine presence much used in Exodus). Elijah's departure includes a succession. Jesus follows the same pattern: he bequeaths his mantle to the church.

I am not surprised that there has always been a stream in Christianity what has expected Jesus to return from on high. The Judaism out of which Christianity grew expected

¹ "For the Love of the World," *Salt Project*, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/5/17/ascension-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-ascension-sunday> (posted 10 May 2026; accessed 12 May 2026).

a Messiah who would be a military ruler. Judaism expected someone who would use violence to reestablish the Davidic line as kings. Many in Christianity have expected something similar from Jesus.

In 1 Thessalonians, which is thought to be the earliest of Paul's letters, there's a passage that shows that Paul believed that Jesus would return from heaven, a "second coming" of Jesus. It is interesting to me that Paul seems to have dropped this belief by the time he wrote his letter to the Romans, the last of the authentic letters of Paul. Nonetheless, there is this passage in 1 Thessalonians 4, one that only for the last 150 years "has been important to ... millions of Christians, mostly in independent Protestant churches, [because it] is one of the foundations of 'rapture theology.' This is the belief that true believers will be raptured from the earth seven years before the second coming of Jesus. They will be spared the suffering – the trials and tribulations, plagues and wars and famines – that will engulf those left behind....

"Rapture theology is almost always accompanied by the claim that the second coming of Jesus will be soon. Polls suggest that around 40 percent of American Christians believe that it will happen in the next 50 years. Most do so because they belong to churches that teach this."²

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg reminds us, "It is important to know that rapture theology – the notion that true Christians will be taken up into heaven seven years before the second coming and final judgment – is neither ancient nor traditional Christianity. It is thoroughly modern. It was conceived in the 1800s by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), an Anglo-Irish clergyman, active in Britain in North America.... Before him, no Christian had spoken of the 'rapture.'"³

That said, it is clear that, at least at the beginning of his evangelical letter writing career, Paul thought Jesus would return in his lifetime to complete what he had begun. And I'm sure he wasn't the only one. The section of the "Little Apocalypse" we heard today made it into Matthew's gospel because there were early Christians who believed Jesus would return in their lifetimes to complete what he had begun. The line in the reading from Acts – "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" – is there because even 80 years after the death of Jesus (about the time Luke-Acts was written), there were Christians who believed Jesus would return in their lifetimes to complete what he had begun.

Borg rightly said, "[This] conviction is a tribute to Jesus. Through him his followers had experienced a new world being born: the old had passed away and a new creation was beginning. Surely its culmination was near. Within this framework, the conviction is the product of enthusiasm and confidence."⁴ It just turns out that the conviction was wrong.

I suspect similar convictions held by so many American Christians today – that Jesus will return in their lifetimes to complete what he had begun – are just as wrong. (We'll have

² Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 37.

³ *Ibid*, 38.

⁴ *Ibid*, 39.

to wait 50 years to find out for certain if they're right or if I'm right.) Either way, I'm okay with them holding this conviction – as long as they don't force their theology on me.

I bring up the issue of forced religious belief because today, the White House is sponsoring a nine-hour festival of “prayer, praise and thanksgiving” on the National Mall. They're calling it “Rededicate 250,” claiming it is kicking off the religious story of America's founding. The Rededicate 250 speaker lineup is comprised mostly white evangelicals. There are two Catholic bishops and a couple of rabbis scheduled to speak. But there will be no Black church leaders, no mainline Protestants, no Hindus, no Muslims, no Buddhists, and no humanists or agnostics or anyone else.⁵

Now, I have no problems with people praying in public – even people I disagree with. After all, the first Amendment says (in part), “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” Prohibiting public prayer would be “prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” What I take issue with is using federal money and the support of the White House to hold such a meeting in a National Park (the Mall) and inviting only a very narrow list of presenters who meet with their theological approval. That smacks of “an establishment of religion.” It elevates MAGA Christianity to a de facto religious establishment and limits other religious Americans from participating freely in the celebration of their own national birthday.

Historian and theologian Diana Butler Bass says, “Rededicate 250 isn't a celebration of American faith. It is a national revival meeting, planned and shaped by only one American religious group: white evangelical Protestants, with a few fellow political travelers invited as mere religious tokenism.”⁶

She points out that “a ‘revival’ is always based in a story of decline. A revival must, by its very nature, be about *returning to a golden age of the ‘faith of our fathers.’*”⁷ But there is no singular “faith of our fathers.” Religious groups on the North American continent have always been diverse. And “Rededicate 250 won't recognize this. Instead,... they will tell half a story, embellished with myths and historical half-truths, and then proclaim that God wants us to return to a glorious and faithful Christian past”⁸ that never existed.

Luke tells the story of the ascension twice. He concludes his gospel with it, and he begins the book of Acts with it. In his version of the ascension in the gospel, Luke says Jesus spent the 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension teaching the disciples. The disciples still aren't understanding the connection between their scriptures (the Hebrew Bible) and Jesus life, death, and resurrection. They're still confused and mixed up and doubtful – joyful, yes, but “in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.”⁹

⁵ Diana Butler Bass, “Integrity in History,” *The Cottage*, <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/integrity-in-history> (posted and accessed 15 May 2026).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Luke 24:41, *NRSVue*.

So, here's Jesus at the eleventh hour, opening "their minds to understanding the scriptures."¹⁰ As one commentator said, "In other words, it's never simply about 'what the Bible says.' It's always about understanding the Bible with wisdom and grace."¹¹

And there they are, back on the Mount of Olives. You might remember that, a month and a half ago, Jesus started his Palm Sunday procession from the Mount of Olives, just as the Messiah was supposed to do. Only Jesus didn't overthrow the Romans like the Messiah was expected to do. "Now, instead of entering Jerusalem, they're leaving it. Now, instead of descending from the Mount of Olives, they climb it. They retrace their steps. And now, instead of the Messiah arriving, the Messiah will ... withdraw and depart. The choreography is striking, and on its face, disturbing: the long-expected pattern of salvation is turned on its head!

"But this disconcerting reversal only makes Jesus' message more clear: he is passing the mantle. It's as if he says, You have heard it said, 'Wait for a Messiah who will deliver you from trouble.' But I say to you, Take up my mantle, for you, too, have a role to play in God's story of redemption. You! You will now take the baton, you will now turn and descend from the Mount of Olives and enter the holy city, 'beginning from Jerusalem.' You are 'witnesses of these things,' you shall proclaim the good news with your words and especially with your lives, you, all of you, I hereby commission you and bless you and send you into the world for the love of the world."¹²

"There is a difference between bearing witness and looking on to a scene as an onlooker. There is a difference between the kind of witness that enters the pain of a hurting world and a spectator who gawks from a distance."¹³ Our call is to bear witness to Jesus' arrival here and now in all areas of life in this age. Jesus commissions us to be witnesses to love – the love we have experienced in and through Jesus.

Amen.

¹⁰ Luke 24:45, *NRSVue*.

¹¹ "For the Love of the World," *op. cit.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Eric D. Parreto, "Acts 1:1-11 in Uvalde," *Church Anew*, <https://churchanew.org/blog/posts/eric-barreto-acts-11-11-in-uvalde> (posted 14 June 2022; accessed 15 May 2026).